

Those Old Files...

Surveying Archives in the National Park Service

Surveys can be an above ground archeological excavation into the unknown or a guided tour of managed, valued documentary resources. Parks that have placed a high priority on records management reap the benefits of access to past research, decisions, controversies, and actions as a foundation for current management. Too often, park staffs are unaware of park records at the National Archives or records stored at the site.

Why Survey Records?

An archival survey at a park may help to establish priorities and/or begin to bring to light little known or long forgotten records. Some parks have records of management of the site prior to National Park Service administration as well as NPS records. The survey process includes discussions with park staff to gain a “big picture” view of the history of the park, the extent of records management work, the location of records, and a review of reference use by staff and other researchers. Stewardship of documentary resources is usually not the responsibility of just one division, but this varies from park to park. Sometimes the administrative officer, curator, or historian has taken on the majority of the responsibility. In some areas a committee of staff members work together to review records management decisions and serve as advocates for preservation of important resource management records. Frequently, the records that survive have served as important reference sources for staff for many years. Records that have been packed away in less accessible storage are more likely to be at risk and assumed to be of little or no current value.

What Is Involved in Surveying?

Survey basics include meeting with the division chief (or other representative) from each division in the park, center, or office. This exchange clarifies the goals of the survey, the need for access to records storage areas (except locked personnel files), and a summary of staff knowledge of park records. Survey forms provide a framework for consistent documentation of each collection or group of records. Included in Appendix D Archives and Manuscript Collections, *NPS Museum Handbook Part II*, is a survey form to duplicate for survey use.

Completing the survey form for each collection of records systematically gathers the who, what, when, where, and why. For example, the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association (GBMA) was an organization formed to acquire and preserve 1863 battlefield land in Gettysburg, PA. Extensive research and documentation of the battle was conducted. War Department staff and veterans worked with the GBMA, including placement of monuments on the battlefield. The GBMA operated from 1864 to 1893 when their holdings of lands and records were turned over to the newly designated Gettysburg National Park administered by the War Department.

Organization charts provide an outline that parallels the organization of park records generated and/or acquired during the course of administration of a park area, center, or central office. Current organization charts can be supplemented with information from administrative histories on changes in management and staffing. Records from all divisions and projects may not be found, but the surveyor has a clearer idea of what he or she may find.

A sense of adventure is an asset as archives survey work frequently involves expeditions to basements, attics, other unheated areas, outbuildings, closets, trailers, and other innovative storage spaces. However, it is usually well worth the effort when park staff exclaim, “I’ve been looking for those files/that report for 10 years!”

What Do Surveyors Ask?

The surveyor needs to ask many questions to understand the historical sequence of major organizations, individuals, and events. Are there records of organizations or individuals that administered the area before the National Park Service? Knowledgeable staff and written administrative histories are major assets when fitting together the pieces of the puzzle. For parks without this information, the staff may be as surprised as the surveyor by the records found. For example, the surveyor may be briefed by helpful park staff that “there are no records before 1970 in the park.” During the survey of 30+ file drawers of “old park files” the surveyor may find records back to the 1920s pre-dating the NPS administration of the

area. The 1920s to 1960s records may have been well known to previous park staff, but at some time the memory was lost. In effect, these major park documentary resources were virtually lost and unavailable to current park staff.

Perceptions of documentary materials and “old files” vary greatly. In some cases the records of early preservation/conservation organizations have been mixed in with NPS records and filed by the respective area. In other cases, the records of each organization are respected as distinct organic units that document sequential eras in the management of a park area. **Just as with historic structures, natural areas, cultural landscapes, and museum objects, the less the materials are altered or rearranged, the more integrity they retain.**

There are many instances of one or two heroic staff defending and saving “old files” even though outnumbered by staff with no knowledge of the contents and long-term value of the records. These situations are just as likely to result in the destruction of important records if records management is not a priority and knowledgeable staff are not involved.

Surveys may be a first step in changing perceptions of archival collections—from “taken for granted” to “integral part of the park’s natural and cultural resources.” Archives surveys begin to document the extent of records, their provenance, condition, and research use. Surveys are also to help staff set priorities for managing records including transfer of specified files to the National Archives and Records Administration as described in NPS-19 *Records Management Guideline*, NPS-28 *Cultural Resource Management Guideline*, NPS-77 *Natural Resource Management Guideline*, and the *NPS Museum Handbook*, certain records are accessioned and cataloged into the park museum collection.

These resource management records are kept with the natural and cultural resources that they document. For records with short-term reference value as specified in the records management schedule, they are destroyed after a designated period of time. The routine administrative records have a short life. If all park records are saved long-term and records management is deferred, the amount of files becomes overwhelming and access is difficult. The survey provides an opportunity to review the records schedule with park staff and/or provide copies of missing portions of the schedule.

Why Bother Surveying?

Once priorities are set for archival collections, Resource Management Plan project statements should be written for the materials that need to be protected, processed, and cataloged. The management of the park’s archival and manuscript collections benefit not just the park, but other parks, cen-

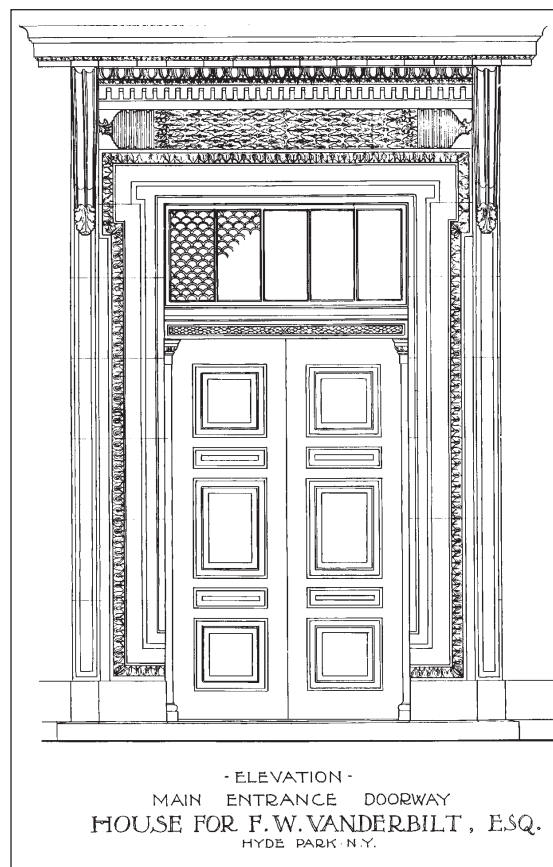
tral offices, and others needing research access to the records.

Surveys provide evidence that the preservation management of natural and cultural resources is dependent on the preservation management of the related records. These resource management records include architectural drawings, photographs, maps, aerial photographs, charts, statistical data, archeological field notes, natural resource project files, forest and structural fire management research and plans, plant surveys, computer disks and tapes, reports, contracts and cooperative agreements, etc.

National Park Service resource management records are critical resources in their own right, but are often not recognized as such. **Park archival collections, no matter their age or provenance, serve to reconnect current staff with the management history of the park. They illuminate the who, what, where, when, and why to inform current decisions.**

Recurring management issues are found in park files and may document work at other parks as well. For example, a file at Morristown NHP labeled with a pre-1950s NPS file code “701-01.4 TREES,” includes correspondence dated 1947 between the tree preservation crew and the park. Included is a schedule for work at Adams Mansion and Salem Maritime NHS in Massachusetts,

One of the original McKim, Mead & White architectural drawings in the archives of Vanderbilt Mansion NHS. C. 1896, ink on tracing cloth.



Vanderbilt Mansion and Home of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in Hyde Park, New York, and Morristown in New Jersey. The tree preservation crew was based in Region One, Richmond, Virginia, was managed by a tree culture foreman, and was responsible for keeping records for each tree that they treated. The forester in Region One consulted with a pathologist, Bureau of Plant Industry, Beltsville, Maryland, to review "the problem of the protection of certain roadside and specimen trees in Morristown NHP from the Dutch Elm disease [and] the desirability of a similar study of the problem at Adams Mansion and Salem Maritime NHS."

In correspondence dated 1938 in the same file, the chief forester informed the superintendent that

[T]he ECW itinerant tree preservation crew is no longer in existence...The Washington and Richmond Offices of the Branch of Forestry will be of as much help as possible, but the bulk of the work and the responsibility must necessarily rest upon each local staff... For this reason it is deemed advisable to decentralize the file of individual tree records heretofore maintained in Washington. We mailed these to various areas concerned under separate cover with the request that they be maintained in the local office and kept up to date as work is done on numbered trees...

A blank form may provide insight into servicewide management of specific resources. An example was found in the 1930s files at Salem Maritime NHS of a *National Park Service, Museum Division Field Study* form. Although some of the language has changed, the basic issues remain current and in some parks have yet to be addressed. Certainly fire doors, sprinklers, exhibit and storage areas, catalog records, funding sources, building uses, and vermin proof storage cases are ongoing concerns.

Pre-park and park establishment records were found at Salem Maritime NHS. The records are those of a private individual, Harlan P. Kelsey, who "collaborated" with others including the National Park Service to protect part of the historic Salem waterfront. The Harlan P. Kelsey Papers have since been processed and cataloged into the park museum collection.

Although park staff knew that these papers were important, no one was sure who Kelsey was or the extent of his involvement with the park. An obituary located in the September 1958 issue of the journal *Planning and Civic Comment* was found in the library of a Boston area university. This research provided biographical data on Kelsey, his

major role in establishing the park and his involvement with other park areas. The notice states:

Through his appointment to the Commission to choose an area in the Southern Appalachians for Eastern National Parks he worked closely with the officers and board members of the [American Planning and Civic] Association and the National Conference on State Parks. This led to the establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah National Parks.

We should not have been surprised when letters from Harlan P. Kelsey were found in the personal correspondence of Ferdinand Zerkel's papers at Shenandoah National Park. Zerkel had been working on a history of the planning, establishment, and early development of Shenandoah NP before he died. He was a key figure in this work at Shenandoah and willed his papers to the park. Just as Kelsey's contributions to Salem Maritime NHS were only partly known to a few park staff, so Zerkel's work is not well known at Shenandoah. His papers are currently being processed and cataloged at the NPS Northeast Museum Services Center.

At Independence NHP, the park archivist reviewed the park records at the Philadelphia branch of the National Archives. Among the records were Completion Reports from the 1950s describing park preservation/restoration work on historic structures that were the subject of an ongoing search by park staff. The documentation in the Completion Reports was needed to plan current preservation/restoration work.

Consistent investment in records management yields huge bonuses in support of current management. Knowledge is a powerful management tool. The mission of the National Park Service is focused on the long-term management of natural and cultural resources, balancing preservation and use. In this context, the resource management records created and acquired by parks are rarely "non-current," but part of a continuum of data, decisions, evaluations and re-assessments. Otherwise, if disconnected from the work of our predecessors, how informed are our decisions and how do we evaluate the quality of current stewardship?

Placing a higher value on preservation of resource management records builds an essential and strong foundation for accomplishing the mission of the National Park Service. **Recognition of resource management records as a critical resource in their own right reinforces the responsible management of all cultural and natural resources.**

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